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Keeping an Eye on Generation Z Nurses

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The long-term impact of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) on the nursing workforce is something that researchers will likely study for years to come. But there is 1 segment of the workforce that warrants closer attention. Although, collectively, nurses were in the same COVID storm, they were not all in the same boat. The evidence is indicating that our youngest nurses had a much tougher time. We need to keep an eye on Generation Z nurses (born between 1997 and 2015), and here's why:

- This month, our nurse leader to watch is Larissa Africa. Larissa is president of Versant, one of the nation's largest providers of new graduate residency programs. The company has a repository of almost 2 decades of data on recent graduates. Larissa reported in our interview that they are starting to see new graduate nurses indicating an intent to leave, not only their organization, but the profession. These data point to a new and possibly troubling trend that researchers at Versant have not seen before.
- New nurse graduates in 2020 transitioned into practice during a challenging time. COVID-19 challenges overwhelmed many health systems. Significant parts of residency programs happened remotely, and there was less face-to-face support. Many of these new nurses had not been in clinical settings for months before graduation. Upon their transition, they found themselves caring for very acutely ill COVID patients with unpredictable trajectories.
- Even pre-COVID, data from the American Psychological Association indicated that the Generational Z cohort reported far lower baselines of excellent or very good mental health.¹
- Baseline trait anxiety and stress levels are higher in Generation Z. In the highly acclaimed documentary, *Social Dilemma*, researchers reported correlations between lowered mental health among Generation Z and the widespread introduction of social media sites.²
- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention data collected in June 2020 during the pandemic indicate that Gen Z reported significantly higher levels of stress, anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation.³
- Recent data from a large sample participating in a nurse well-being study indicate that Generation Z nurses were the most likely (57.3%) to report that COVID-19 negatively impacted their overall well-being. Gen Z was also the least likely (only 23.5%)

to report effectively managing work-related stress and anxiety or to decompress after work (only 19.2% could).⁴

- Only 15.4% of Gen Z nurses in the Nurse Wellbeing at Risk survey felt comfortable discussing their well-being with their manager versus 59.6% of Baby Boomer nurses.⁴

Resilience builds over time. The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche wisely said, "that which does not kill us makes us stronger."⁵ Not surprisingly, the Nurse Wellbeing survey findings indicate that Generation X and Baby Boomer nurses reported higher well-being and resilience levels. Nurses in these generational cohorts have more life experience and usually have also confronted more adversity. We know from the resilience research that we anchor every new challenging experience against others that we have had. We can draw energy from remembering how we have overcome other challenges. Most Generation Z nurses have less experience with adversity. It is difficult for them to put the COVID-19 experience into any context. When a young Gen Z nurse tells you that "I didn't sign up for this," it is a cry out that some of their core beliefs about nursing were disrupted, and they are having challenges understanding what is happening.

Nurse leader coaching has always been essential, but perhaps now it is essential more than ever. We know from research that growing up with digital devices has made it harder for Gen Z to have face-to-face conversations. Nurse leaders cannot wait for their young Gen Z nurses to initiate a conversation about their well-being because they are unlikely to do. Leaders must take the initiative. Our Generation Z was in a much different boat during COVID, and we need to keep an eye on them.

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